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AUTHOR Carr, Sonya C.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the perceptions of rural teachers who completed the Exceptional Family course as part of a specialized rural training program at Southeastern Louisiana University. A requirement for certification or a master's degree in special education, the course aims to provide an understanding of exceptional families using a family systems approach, to examine special challenges faced by exceptional families, to promote effective communication strategies, and to review legislation and litigation affecting special education. Over a 5-year period, 92 rural teachers participated in the course and completed precourse and postcourse questionnaires. Analysis of precourse questionnaires indicated that most respondents had no formal training in working with families of children with special needs, did not consider close involvement with families as valuable or part of their responsibilities, described rural families as reluctant to disclose personal information and cautious in dealing with the school system, and placed the causes or responsibility for conflicts on families and not the teacher. Postcourse questionnaires revealed that the course had changed the views of most respondents about exceptional families, particularly regarding the value of parental involvement and the teacher's role in encouraging it. Respondents also indicated that their improved understanding of rural families would make them more sensitive and less judgmental. In addition, teachers' new understanding of family systems led to greater confidence in working with rural exceptional families. Fifteen rural teachers who completed follow-up questionnaires 1 to 2 years after course completion indicated that they had a better understanding of rural families, were more skilled in dealing with families, and were successful in encouraging family involvement. (LP)

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Sonya C. Carr, Ph.D.
Southeastern Louisiana University
Hammond, Louisiana

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WORKING WITH EXCEPTIONAL FAMILIES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Research in the field of special education has increasingly demonstrated the importance of family involvement in the education and habilitation of children and youth with disabilities. In addition, federal legislation (IDEA) has mandated parent involvement in the identification, diagnosis, placement, and programming of children and youth with disabilities. The special education teacher has a critical role in facilitating this involvement, often acting as a liaison between the school and the family. In rural areas, collaboration is particularly important as family members can become essential resources in program planning and implementation.

Today, there is strong support for the notion of training special education teachers to work effectively with families (e.g., Shea & Bauer, 1991; Simpson, 1996; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Teachers have traditionally received little formal training in this area and typically rely on personal experiences with their own families and communities. Training is even more critical for teachers working with families in rural areas, as unique approaches and specialized skills may be required. It has long been advocated that university faculty develop specialized training models to address the unique needs of rural special educators (e.g., Cole & Leeper, 1995; Helge, 1984; Marrs, 1984). This argument is particularly powerful given the high attrition rates of rural special educators (e.g., Berkeley & Lipinski, 1991; Helge, 1983; Lemke, 1995).

A specialized rural training program has been implemented at Southeastern Louisiana University (SLU) in the Department of Special Education. SLU is a regional university serving 14 parishes (counties), of which eight are considered rural according to the most recent U.S. Census. Since 1992, the author has infused rural issues into "The Exceptional Family" course as one component of this specialized program. The primary purpose of the Exceptional Family course is to provide students with an understanding of exceptional families using a systems perspective. Cultural diversity, with emphasis on rural culture, is explored and differences in cultural factors are examined. The course is essentially divided into three sections. Students first, acquire an understanding of a family systems approach through lecture, as well as use of videotapes, case studies, and small group activities. Differences between urban and rural communities are examined as they relate to families and school districts. Special challenges exceptional families in rural areas may face are examined. In the second section of the course, students learn

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about effective communication strategies and practice nonverbal and verbal communication skills. They participate in values clarification activities, role plays, and other small group activities designed to help students learn about themselves and reflect on their own communication skills. Videotaped segments in which parents describe their experiences with professionals are used to make lectures and readings more relevant and meaningful. In the third section of the course legislation and litigation relevant to special education are examined, again utilizing a family perspective. A "Listening to Families" project is completed by all students to apply course content and practice communication skills using an interview format.

The purpose of this paper is to present the perceptions of teachers enrolled in the Exceptional Family course. Because these teachers lived and worked in rural communities they may have unique perspectives regarding the exceptional children and families they serve. Teachers' perspectives on home visits, working with "difficult" families, value conflicts, roles of the teacher, and training needs are examined.

Method

Participants

Over a five year period, 157 individuals participated in the revised Exceptional Family course. Student enrollment was between 14 and 32 students each semester, with the majority of students involved seeking special education certification and/or a master's degree. Other students enrolled were either counseling or speech-language and hearing majors. For this paper, only the responses of the 92 rural teachers completing the course were examined. Most of these were teachers with certification in regular education, who were seeking certification in special education and/or completing a graduate program of study leading to a master's degree.

Questionnaires

As a method of formative evaluation, a pre-course, post-course questionnaire procedure was established. The pre-course questionnaire, an adaptation of one developed by Kerns (1992), consisted of six open-ended questions designed to obtain information about previous experiences and training in working with families, as well as perceived value conflicts or problem areas in their actual work in the schools. The post-course questionnaire examined changes in attitudes, beliefs, or practices based on course involvement. Additionally, a follow-up questionnaire was sent to selected students one to two years after course completion to investigate changes in teacher beliefs and practices.

Procedure

Students completed the pre-course questionnaire anonymously during the first class meeting each semester. Responses were

requested as a means of eliciting individual perceptions of families, as well as training needs and priorities. The post-course questionnaire was completed on the last class meeting and again these responses were anonymous. Questionnaires were kept in a sealed envelope for the instructor until after grades were submitted each semester.

For the follow-up questionnaire, a list was compiled of rural teachers completing the course between 1992 and 1995. This sample consisted of graduate students enrolled in the master's degree program and/or participants in a federally-funded rural personnel preparation project. Individuals for whom mailing addresses were available were surveyed one to two years after completion of the course. A total of 35 questionnaires were mailed with a letter explaining the purpose of the questionnaire and assuring anonymity of the responses. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they resided in and taught in a rural parish (county). Fifteen questionnaires were completed and returned for a response rate of 43%. Because responses were anonymous, there was no follow up of nonrespondents.

Results

In the following paragraphs, summaries of teachers' responses for each of the three questionnaires are presented.

Pre-Course Questionnaire

The majority of respondents reported no formal training in working with families of children with special needs. Most described a one-day workshop or information presented in an introductory special education course as the only source of information on working with families. When asked about their involvement with students' families, many teachers clearly did not consider close involvement with families as desirable or part of their responsibilities. They tended to make judgmental statements about these parents. Teachers typically viewed parents as one dimensional figures and their comments indicated a limited understanding of family life. Rural families were often described as reluctant to disclose personal information and cautious or withdrawn in dealing with the school system. Conflicts were viewed as being "caused" by or the responsibility of family members and not the teacher.

Post-Course Questionnaire

The majority of teachers reported that the course had changed their views or at least confirmed and expanded previously held views about exceptional families. According to one teacher, "It reaffirmed my belief in parent/professional collaboration and partnership. This is easy to lose in the daily grind." Another teacher said, "Parent involvement is crucial in planning the education program of children. As an educator, I need to realize that what is happening with the child is affecting all members of

his/her family. If I am to better understand what is happening, I have to get the parents involved."

Teachers indicated that they would be more sensitive, more empathetic, and less judgmental. For example, "I'll think twice before condemning a family for failure to participate." And according to another teacher, "I believe I have more empathy for parents. I now realize that I sometimes blamed them for their child's behavior problems. I'm more likely to consider that they have different concerns, needs, and priorities rather than writing them off as uncaring."

Many teachers indicated their intent to use newly-learned techniques to "build rapport and true partnerships" with the parents of their students. As one teacher stated, "I now view parents as a vital part of planning their child's educational program." Teachers described wanting to "empower" parents rather than making all decisions and doing things for them.

During the course, students completed a role play of an interview with a rural family. They audio taped this interview to allow grading of the interaction for a course assignment. Most students reported that the activity forced them to examine their communication skills and to reflect on the manner in which they carry out meetings with parents. Students indicated that this activity generated new insights. For example, "It was good to be sitting on the other side of the table [as a parent]. The interview helped me to realize all of the emotions and concerns that these parents go through."

Teachers agreed that they would approach situations in which value conflicts arise differently. Many recognized that greater family involvement in a child's educational program is a first step in preventing conflicts. Several teachers expressed thoughts similar to the following: "Parents know their child better than anyone else and it is their right to see that their child's needs are met." And according to another teacher, "I probably will be more willing to allow and encourage broader views and different values because I am now more aware of their importance."

Teachers reported that their views of their roles in working with families had changed over the semester. For example, one teacher said, "I see my role as assisting families more than the "authoritarian" way I used to respond." And according to another teacher, "I now see that I must include all family members and that their input is necessary and valuable." Teachers reported feeling committed to encouraging family involvement, particularly in IEP or IFSP conferences. They reported that they would invite more parental input by listening more carefully, seeking parental opinions, and asking open-ended questions. As one teacher indicated, "Although I have always wanted to involve the families more, I felt as if I couldn't really connect with them. Now I will try different methods."

When asked, most teachers said that their involvement with families would be different because they were more skilled. Many planned to provide additional information to parents, and to more carefully explain issues such as legal rights and the evaluation process. Some teachers commented on the notion that a family's logistical problems may interfere with school involvement. They indicated that they would try to recognize potential logistical problems and take this into consideration in planning meetings. As one teacher commented, "I will be more thoughtful about logistics that may cause families hardships." And according to another teacher, "I think now I will be less apt to jump to conclusions when a parent doesn't come to a meeting. I will be more considerate of their time and responsibilities."

Finally, with regard to their level of comfort or discomfort in working with families, teachers indicated that their new understanding of family systems contributed to greater comfort in working with families. As one teacher commented, "I feel more comfortable because I feel like I have strategies and resources that I can rely on to help me interact with families more effectively." And according to another teacher, "I feel that I have grown as an individual. I can relate better to families and various problems they encounter."

Follow-up questionnaire

Each of the six follow-up questions is listed along with a discussion of teacher responses.

Did the course, the Exceptional Family, change your attitudes toward and/or interactions with the families of your students? Teachers indicated that since completing the course they had a better understanding of families, stresses faced by parents and siblings, and how families could react to stressful situations. As one teacher reported, "The project required made me directly confront reality. While texts explained details and labels, actual contact with real life situations made me ultimately a better teacher." Teachers described using course information in planning homework assignments, evaluating problems, and resolving conflicts. As one teacher noted, "I was encouraged to try harder to get families involved in my students' education."

Which course topics/activities were particularly effective in developing your own skills for working with families/parents? The most influential activities identified were use of case studies, role plays, and a rural parent's presentation of her family's life story. As one teacher stated, "I very much enjoyed and profited from the role-playing sessions. We experienced the feelings that parents have and this I think makes me understand the parents better." Teachers also identified three topics as being very influential: family systems theory, coping strategies, and exchanging information with families.

How might this course have changed your understanding of the special challenges faced by families living in rural areas? The majority of respondents emphasized potential logistical barriers that rural families face. They cited lack of transportation, access to services, and support as examples of these obstacles. According to one teacher, "Before taking this course I usually interpreted parental noninvolvement as an attitude of unconcern. This course helped me to become aware of the many reasons that may keep rural parents from being involved with the school and/or their child's education." And another teacher reflected on teachers who only have experience in urban settings, "understanding the lack of transportation, the isolation of not having a phone, and the lack of modern conveniences (indoor plumbing) is necessary to comprehend the priorities and perspectives of some rural families."

Have you incorporated more family involvement since taking the course? All teachers reported success in encouraging greater family involvement. Strategies found useful included: examining school records to seek out more family information, using a notebook to correspond daily with parents, calling parents frequently, encouraging all family members to visit the classroom, involving students in activities such as 4-H and Special Olympics, and planning additional parent/teacher conferences. One teacher also emphasized the importance of listening to family members as a means of encouraging family involvement. As she said, "I listen more, and ask them what they want rather than telling them what I am going to do."

If your behavior has changed, has this had any impact on your colleagues? Several teachers reported that they had helped other teachers become more aware of the need for family involvement. They described serving as role models or advisors for new special education teachers, and acting as advocates for involvement of exceptional families in meetings and advocates for special education students in school activities. Some teachers indicated that additional information obtained through increased parental involvement resulted in an improvement in the quality of IEP conferences, and in other teachers being more willing to provide appropriate adaptations for students. As one teacher explained, "I never fail to mention that the 'problem' child being discussed is in fact someone's child, that the whole picture must be taken into account. I encourage teachers to talk to families to work things out as a unit."

Has taking this course had any other impact on your personal and/or professional life? Professionally, teachers indicated that they were more relaxed and more skillful regarding discipline in the classroom. They also viewed themselves as more respectful and empathetic with others who have different values or ideals. "The course made me more tolerant, understanding, and caring in dealing with parents, siblings, and students." With regard to their personal lives, one teacher stated, "I have tried to look at my own family in a slightly different light." And another teacher stated, "In my personal life, I've taken others' personal situations

(religion, financial situation, background, etc.) into consideration."

Conclusion

Teachers' views of exceptional families changed as an outcome of involvement in this course. Some individuals described the course as an "eyeopener." Most individuals developed a new understanding of family dynamics, and recognized the impact on the family of a child with a disability. While they may have previously paid "lip service" to the notion of family involvement, they came to recognize that family involvement is essential. Teachers were excited about developing more effective communication skills and acquiring strategies to encourage family involvement. Many teachers indicated that they planned to use family needs surveys and structured interviews as tools to develop a better understanding of family needs and priorities. As one teacher said, "Now I have a lot more resources to offer them and I have a step by step professional plan on how to handle difficult situations."

In the process, teachers also developing an understanding of why they should not impose their values and/or expectations on others. In their final comments, many described the importance of attempting to "walk in the shoes" of family members. With regard to changes in their perceived roles, one teacher said, "I see it as assisting or aiding the families more than the 'authoritarian' way I used to."

Another interesting outcome of this course for teachers is the understanding that while developing a partnership with a family may require greater effort initially, it can lessen the load on the teacher because decision-making responsibility is shared. As one teacher said, "I'm more relaxed about letting parents have more control." And another teacher, "Yes, this course has made it easier not to 'bring them home' and worry. Although I can still care, I am not so personally responsible for what my idea is of their needs. What works for them may be better than my idea of what is best." And a final comment, "I never really thought I had the ability to help a family but now I feel "empowered."

The positive comments of these teachers on the post-course and follow-up questionnaires are exciting. These comments indicate that teachers and family members can become empowered as they collaborate in program planning and implementation. The knowledge and skills acquired in courses like "The Exceptional Family" can influence special educators' decisions to remain in the field and continue to serve their rural communities.

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